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# Dublin is now a 'leading digital science centre' for pharma giant Novartis



*Ciara O'Connell. Image: Kenneth O'Halloran*

## **Novartis's Ciara O'Connell discusses the role of data in pharma and how the company is tapping into Ireland's 'significant tech ecosystem'.**

Ciara O'Connell is head of the Novartis Global Service Centre (NGSC) in Ireland. This was set up in 2013 and is now one of five sites worldwide delivering a variety of services to the multinational pharma company in areas such as AI and data.

O'Connell is a native of Cork, where Novartis has a strong presence, and studied commerce at University College Cork. After nearly a decade with the company, she now leads a team of more than 1,000 at its growing base in Dublin.

**'Covid-19 underlines the importance of grasping the opportunities that arise when you combine pure science with data science and digital technology'**

**– CIARA O'CONNELL**

### **What does your role entail?**

Our talented team works with Novartis divisions in other countries to deliver quality end-to-end pharma commercial, medical and clinical solutions leveraging the entire Novartis network. It is an exciting area as we need continuous business innovation to meet diverse customer and patient needs across the global Novartis network.

For example, the Global Drug Development unit, part of the NGSC, has more than 80 clinical scientists and 20 data science/artificial intelligence specialists all based in Dublin. This important unit oversees Novartis's global clinical trial activities and is a critical part of the journey through which we are bringing innovative medicines to patients around the world.

I'm very fortunate to work with talented data and digital teams, who have the shared goal of using technology to bring potentially transformative medicines to patients and who teach me new things every day!

### **What are some of the key opportunities you're capitalising on in your sector?**

Novartis Ireland is a leader in digital science and we are supporting the company to achieve this ambition. The NGSC in Dublin is Novartis's leading digital science centre globally – this is due to the fact that there is such a large amount of digital talent and a significant tech ecosystem in Ireland.

While tech talent may not immediately associate the pharma sector with technology leadership, our office in Dublin is helping to change that perception. We have an innovative team of data scientists and data managers who are harnessing the power of digital to revolutionise the way that we manage disease and ultimately get our medicines to patients faster.

We are capitalising on opportunities in the sector by attracting and nurturing tech talent. For example, since the pandemic, we have employed around 400 people to work in the Dublin office.

### **What are the biggest challenges facing your sector and how are you tackling them?**

The pandemic sparked a significant shift in the adoption and scaling up of digital technology across the healthcare sector at an unprecedented scale and pace. For example, during the pandemic it was often not possible to meet face to face with healthcare practitioners due to the restrictions.

Our creative and digital teams in Dublin overnight transformed medical content into digital formats that supported our medical and field representatives with tools to connect and support doctors across the world.

Covid-19 underlines the importance of grasping the opportunities that arise when you combine pure science with data science and digital technology. Drawing on the power of AI and machine learning, our expert digital and data teams are helping to deliver better patient experiences and outcomes.

### **What set you on the road to where you are now?**

I always wanted the opportunity to make a difference in my career. Since joining Novartis, I have been fortunate to have the chance to achieve this ambition.

Working with the most talented people in science and tech, my role as head of the NGSC provides me with a clear purpose – to provide patients with access to better medicine, faster.

### **What's the biggest risk you've ever taken?**

I might answer that question differently and take the time to talk about the power of calculated risk taking. I feel it is really important to provide a safe environment for teams to feel comfortable to take risks and try new approaches.

Continuous learning also means being ready to deal with failure, to learn lessons fast, and to persist further. It is one of my responsibilities within Novartis to create

an environment where this is possible, and where people feel safe to experiment, think big and take calculated risks.

### **What one work skill do you wish you had?**

I lead a team of more than 1,000 people, so for me it's really important to remain grounded, show vulnerability and to continue to develop my 'unboss' skills. I don't think a hierarchical style of management inspires continuous business innovation.

For me, real leadership today requires an ability to create opportunity for the people around you. This is especially true for the emerging generation of talent who naturally gravitate towards companies and managers because they believe in their ideas, values and purpose as opposed to a traditional approach to leadership.

### **How do you get the best out of your team?**

The pandemic is accelerating the need to offer new ways of working and we are creating an approach that optimises personal and business performance. We know that our people are at their most creative and productive when they are empowered and enabled to take accountability for their work and choices, so our focus is on allowing people choose when, and where, they work.

This new way of working has really worked for me and my family – it's very rewarding on days working from home to be there when the kids get in from school.

Similarly, we understand that becoming a parent is a life-changing experience and last year we introduced new parental leave guidelines – 26 weeks of fully paid parental leave to all employees, regardless of gender. We want to give families more choice and flexibility in how they spend those precious, early moments, while at the same time strengthening our efforts towards creating a more inclusive society.

### **Have you noticed a diversity problem in your sector and what can be done to improve the situation?**

I am a champion for diversity and inclusion in our teams because I've seen that they are good for our business.

We all need to seek, listen to and act upon different perspectives, gather the voices and input of people of different genders, races, ages, cultures, nationalities, personalities, thinking styles, backgrounds and experiences.

CAO figures show that there has been a steady increase in the number of female school-leavers applying to study STEM subjects, but we still need to do more to encourage greater diversity in our industry.

One of the ways Novartis is responding to this challenge is by implementing policies helping to shape a world where gender balance is the norm. For example, our parental leave guidelines, along with flexible working opportunities, remove obstacles so our people can share family responsibilities equally and progress their careers. We are also committed to achieving gender parity in management and to improve pay equity and transparency.

**What's the best piece of career advice you have ever received?**

Someone once said to me, take every opportunity you can to learn. One of the things that inspires me at Novartis is the personal development opportunities to learn and grow – we don't just learn to a certain point in our careers and then stop. I learn new things every day – particularly from my inspirational team.

**What books have you read that you would recommend?**

I am currently reading Snow by John Banville. I don't usually read thrillers or detective books, but I couldn't resist a murder mystery set in Wexford.